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ABSTRACT

From the very first, textbook editions of Shakespeare have been, "badly edited, ineptly glossed, and inexcusably bowdlerized" (Levin, 1976). What is studied in schools is a version, or rather a "perversion" of Shakespeare controlled by narrow religious, sexual, racial, and social interests. A fear of laughter and cultural elitism, among other things, informs the choice of "Romeo and Juliet," "Julius Caesar," "Macbeth," and "Hamlet" for inclusion in the current high school curricula. An alternative curriculum, which might be called "The Other Shakespeare," could represent the balance of tragedy, history, comedy, and romance that readers and viewers have come to expect since the publication of the first folio. The purpose of such a curriculum would be to stimulate discussion about feminism, drugs, war, racism, human sexuality, religious and political persecution, terrorism and other issues. Choices such as "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (for freshmen); "The Merchant of Venice" (for sophomores); "Othello" (for juniors); "The Winter's Tale" or "The Tempest" (for seniors) would raise these issues. Ideally, the curriculum should remain open, and plays should be taught on a rotating basis in accordance with the expertise and scholarly interests of the teacher and the capacities of the students. Teachers and students must be aware of the pressures to sanitize and standardize the curriculum and exert the necessary counterforce (such as smuggling in Xeroxed copies of plays or personal copies of videotaped productions) to reform the teaching of Shakespeare in high school classrooms. (SAM)

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# SILENCING THE VULGAR AND VOICING THE OTHER SHAKESPEARE

James R. Andreas

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# Silencing the vulgar and voicing the other Shakespeare

*by James R. Andreas*

... Charles Frey has thoroughly documented just how thorny a problem the Shakespeare curriculum has remained in the history of American education.[1] From the very first, textbook editions of Shakespeare have been, according to Harry Levin, "badly edited, ineptly glossed, and inexcusably bowdlerized."[2] Whatever the motives for such editorial tampering, the fact remains that textual and production variables do determine what Shakespeare will be made to teach students and how the Bard will be viewed by the population at large. Whether we like it or not, Shakespeare is probably one of the voices which most fully authorizes the teaching and study of literature in our culture, as well as a significant bit of ethics, politics, and religion. When the Bard's voice is silenced, manipulated, or adapted with a political agenda in mind, professional Shakespeareans should pay attention. As Toni Morrison has recently remarked, "Canon building is empire building ...and all of the interests are vested."[3] What we have at the moment in the schools is a version or rather a perversion of Shakespeare controlled by narrow religious, sexual, racial, and social interests.[4] The canon of plays currently taught in the classroom is rigorously circumscribed, generically and thematically; the texts chosen for study are often doctored and censored, and productions to be viewed are frequently scanned for ideological impertinence and possible scandal.

In this paper I would like to take a broad look at the four plays included in the current curriculum most students pursue in the standard textbooks: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and for the "gifted" at least, *Hamlet*. Generally, I have reviewed the justifications for the choice of these particular plays, the expurgations in the current editions of the texts students use, the teaching apparatus that accompanies them in the glosses, the annotations and notes, and the introductions in the manuals. Not the least of my concerns is the fear of laughter and the cultural elitism that obviously informs the current selection with its elimination of comic plays from the curriculum as well as humorous passages and characters from the tragedies that are studied. Women, usually the heroines of the comedies and romances, are virtually silent in the existing curriculum by the strategy of generic exclusion. My overall purpose, I suppose, is to decipher what stilted, stuffy model of "Shakespeare" emerges in the minds of the students given this rather systematic barrage of "disinformation" about the Bard.

Finally, I would like to propose an alternative curriculum I would call "The Other Shakespeare," with a balance of tragedy, history, comedy, and romance that readers and viewers of Shakespeare have come to expect since the publication of the first folio. This is a curriculum that would demonstrate what C. L. Barber conceives as the radical development and full flowering of Shakespeare's dramatic ideology and technique over his long career in the theater. The selection proposed would unavoidably include the usual male focus that is a constant in Shakespeare's theater, but would broaden as the canon itself does to include the witty women, the talented, resourceful aliens, and the subversive servants and clowns that are also permanent features of Shakespeare's imaginative terrain. The objective pursued in this curriculum would not be the *avoidance* but the *pursuit* of controversy as the unmistakable feature of a playwright whose genius flourished in, and in spite of, an era fraught with religious and political tyranny, persecution, and terrorism—just like our own.

For several generations now the curriculum of plays studied in American secondary schools has remained relatively fixed. The choices are predictable and probably quite dreary for most high school teenagers, especially given the textbook digests of the plays and the prescribed methods for teaching them advanced in the manuals accompanying those textbooks. The students are no longer introduced to Shakespeare the way most of us were, through the raucous and humorous erotic tangle of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What students now get the first year is the companion piece to the dream, *Romeo and Juliet*, the nightmare where Shakespeare dramatizes the old Ovidian story of Pyramus and Thisbe in its original, tragic key. . . . Of the six literature textbooks for high school freshmen I examined, including the current edition (1984-1990) of Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, McGraw-Hill, Macmillan-Collier, Scott-Foresman, McDougal-Littell, and Scribner-Macmillan-Collier, five used sometimes mutilated, but always sanitized texts of the play, eliminating some 400 lines of text, virtually all the comic and satiric as well as the bawdy jokes of the Nurse, Mercutio, and the servants of the Montagues and the Capulets. [6] Six lines of Friar Lawrence which sum up the play thematically are usually targeted for deletion; they graphically illustrate the not so hidden agenda of the censors:

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The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;
What is her burying grave, that is her womb;
And from her womb children of divers kind
We sucking on her natural bosom find;
Many for many virtues excellent,
None but for some, and yet all different. (II.iii. 9-14)

...The play the students come to read is one dimensional, a neat illustration of Freud's death-wish. Much of the human interest has been removed in order to sanitize and even neuter the text and to displace some of its principal themes, the renewal of life through the pleasures of eros and the playfully illicit humor that verbalizes such pleasures. those characters who affirm the joy and desire of life and who identify so closely with the young protagonists—the servants, the Nurse and Mercutio, the characters Shakespeare himself eventually silences in the play to get on with the tragic business cooked up by their betters—are muffled by our new editors in their very first appearances onstage. The young characters of the play and the students themselves, contemporaries actually at fourteen-years-old, are offered little alternative to the violent hatred of their elders and the suicidal objective to which it leads, no glimpse whatsoever of the life forces of "womb," birth, nursing, sexual appetite, love, and humor that we all crave and that the species needs for its very survival. In short, the marginal viewpoints of women, servants, and tricksters are trimmed back, viewpoints which are vehicles to some of Shakespeare's most impressive thematic and metatheatrical effects in the play. Derogatory comments about the church and the law are also removed. In the expurgated version *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a brutal, mechanistic tragedy with little humor, erotic appeal, grace, or depth.... In the student text, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a moral parable of the mechanism that clicks in when parents are disobeyed. No matter that in Shakespeare's text the young lovers are crossed by their own parents, not the stars, for in the student editions all the human and humorous impediments to this tragic process are removed... .

In the sophomore year, students are still reading *Julius Caesar* as they were as far back as the American Civil War. Given the fact that they will read *Macbeth* in the junior year, they are given a full dose of what may be construed as civic virtue in high school. *Julius Caesar* introduces them to the masculine concept of the Roman imperium, to the elitism of Roman rhetoric and political privilege, and to the patriarchal bias... . *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* deal, of course, with the scourge of political assassination and the dreadful consequences assassins must suffer. Senior year the chosen few, the honors or so-called "gifted" students, read *Hamlet*. Given this curricular context, *Hamlet* becomes yet another play dealing with political insubordination and assassination; we might recall that the young Prince himself identifies with Brutus and his "brute part" just before he murders Polonius, who admits to having played Caesar in school productions. Given the curricular context of these particular four tragedies, it would be easy enough to teach each of them—and the manuals lean in this direction—as parables of familial, social, and political insubordination and punishment.

Interestingly enough, the students are never spared the actual as opposed to the virtual image of violence in these plays. Caesar's assassination is performed onstage with all of the tyrant's wounds gaping significantly like "poor, poor dumb mouths," as Antony characterizes them. One feels that the point of Lady Macbeth's "unsexing" and of her renunciation of maternal instinct, sometimes cut from student texts, is that desensitization is necessary as a preparation for premeditated murder; remove the verbalization and metaphoric power of sexual passion, and actual violence becomes a possibility and ultimately an eventuality. In all four of the plays studied, the first and most common target of the censors is sexual swagger and allusions to maidenhood, intercourse, prostitution, nursing, to in short, all reproductive functions, the essence of the generically comic and romantic effects with which Shakespeare begins and concludes his career. The major impulse behind most of the textual choices and deletions in the student editions is the elimination of scatology, particularly sexual innuendo; the text is "neutered" in the interest, one supposes, of protection of the student, but protection from what is the question, for without the verbal violence of comic exchange, tragic violence is allowed to run its grisly course unopposed and even undescribed.

Ideally, the curriculum should remain open; plays should be taught on a rotating basis, based on the expertise and scholarly interest of the teacher and the capacities and inclinations of the students. If publishing

houses cannot adapt to such flexible demands with conventional textbooks, teachers should be encouraged to use individual paperback editions of the plays, and they do. This curriculum might be entitled "The Other Shakespeare." Its purpose would be to stimulate discussion about feminism, drugs, war, human sexuality, racism, religious and political persecution, terrorism, and other issues. I would include these plays in the new curriculum: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*.

Since the schools have long been the locus of all sorts of social, ethical, and political pressures, we should feel encouraged to provide educational opportunities that sensitize students to these issues and promote free ranging conversation about them. Should students be taught about sex and drugs in school, to protect them from unwanted pregnancy, addiction, and fatal disease? If so, why not expose them to the complexitites of these issues in the plays of Shakespeare, ever open as they are to new interpretative application and production possibilities?

For many years freshmen were introduced to Shakespeare with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an auspicious choice indeed. Its lightning pace and profusion of subjects are bound to please: young lovers running off to the woods against the will of the father and edict of the king, fairies cavorting with beasts and arguing about their infidelities, tricksters pursuing pranks with drugs and their magical effects on the erotic choices of young lovers, and amateur actors converting the stuff of dramatic tragedy to comedy. All this represents a fine potage of adolescent fantasy brewed up for the most part by a young sprite who is an adolescent troublemaker himself. The play puts students on the right track immediately; Shakespeare is perceived as a treasure not because he is a tradition, but because he is a treat, a confection of music, dance, sex, prank, and confusion that in just about any available production will pique the interest of the most jaded adolescent taste.

I would follow up in the sophomore year with *The Merchant of Venice* to show students the limitations of comedy or any generically pure form. Whatever one's ultimate interpretation of this provocative play, the issue of anti-Semitism and the critique of materialism and unrestrained capitalism cannot be ignored.... Most importantly, students will be introduced to their own recent history through this play, to a conception of the twentieth century that came to embody fully the horrors of "alien laws" that can be invoked arbitrarily to dispossess marginal groups of their property, children, and even their lives. Interestingly enough, Shakespeare introduces the brutal concept of a set of special laws for aliens through Portia, a woman fully in control of the play's legal and social apparatus. The play, in short, anticipates the embodiment of racial terrorism, dispossession, detention, concentration, and liquidation that has borne its full, strong fruit in our own century.

Students of "The Other Shakespeare" would study the Moor as well as the *Merchant of Venice* in their junior year; *Othello* would extend the discussion of marginal groups and their struggles for existence within the context of Venetian—read Christian European—society. This would be their first exposure to pure tragedy, but a tragedy that follows from flaws in the character of the society rather than the individual. Try as its critics have since Bradley to saddle Othello with the full burden of the guilt for his passionate crime and to view Iago as "motiveless," the play seems to incriminate western society at large for its predisposition to the periodic, ritual slaughter of marginal and aboriginal groups. Once again a recent production unleashes the social and political possibilities of this play that have lain dormant for centuries in the text, with the exception of the powerful portrayals of Othello by Paul Robeson in the Thirties and Forties and Trevor Nunn's rendition at the Swan theater in Stratford last year... . This production, which students might also be able to see soon on videotape, featured American Civil War decor and uniforms to underscore the racial implications of the text, and Willard White, a black operatic baritone debuted as a huge, barrel chested Othello. Iago, played brilliantly by Ian McKellan, entertains because he conspires with us, the audience, along with Roderigo, Cassio, and Brabantio, as willing partners in his plot to murder lovers soiled in the blood feud between races. He has willing collaborators in the audience, because he is the secret projection of our deepest fears of the "other," of the alien free to prowl and pollute the streets of Venice... . McKellan's Iago, like the Native American mischief maker Iagoo, is the sprite of malice, in this case, of racial hatred. His purpose is to arrange and realize our basest fears on stage: the ritual slaughter of a couple transgressing racial and sexual codes. The invisible theme of racism and the murder it provokes are rendered visible for all to see in this gruesome production, and it is a theme students must see, talk about, and to free

socially psychic terrain from the dictates of the irrational preconceptions that our Hitlers, Mussolinis, Stalins, MacCarthys, and Hoovers have preyed on periodically throughout history. The scenario of their own history with its periodic racial assassination, rape, and riot is here dramatized for them, a history that was spawned during Shakespeare's century and in Shakespeare's own culture.

In the fourth year students of "The Other Shakespeare" should turn to the romance, either *The Winter's Tale*, to follow through with Shakespeare's modulation—mediated by women—of the themes of jealousy and patriarchal tyranny in *Othello* to another generic key, or to *The Tempest*, a play which gives us yet another look at male prerogative and the varieties of servitude in the western world it has generated. Here students will come upon yet another father arranging relationships for his daughter and another tyrant dominating the spirit world, but this play is about renunciation of power as well as about the acceptance of servitude out of love rather than force. Caliban, of course, is the problematic alien in the play, and fruitful discussion of his role as aboriginal might be pursued, a discussion that may well be grounded in the perceptions of Montaigne through his mouthpiece in the play, Gonzalo.

Whatever the Shakespearean curriculum in high school, teachers at every level of instruction should think critically about what is being taught and how it is being taught. Institutions have always controlled the curriculum in schools—the church, the state, and now, according to Sue Jansen in her important new book, *Censorship: The Knot That Binds Power and Knowledge*, commercial and technical interests.[14] Teachers and scholars must be aware of the pressures to sanitize and standardize the curriculum, and exert the appropriate counterforce where necessary. That such influence has already been exercised is evident in the new student texts from some publishing houses. Scott-Foresman, for instance, has restored the full text of *Romeo and Juliet* in its most recent edition of its literature textbook. And teachers around the country continue to smuggle in xerox copies of the plays and personal copies of videotaped productions to stimulate and challenge their students. As teachers at whatever level, we all share the responsibility for preserving and extending the influence of the great texts of our civilization. We should be certain that students are getting the text, the whole text, and maybe even nothing but the text.❑

Notes

1. "Teaching Shakespeare in America," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35 (1984): 541-560.

2. *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 15, quoted in Frey, p. 542.

3. Quoted in *The Stanford Observer* (October, 1989), p. 16.

4. Again this is nothing new, according to Stephen J. Brown in "The Uses of Shakespeare in America: A Study in Class Domination," in *Shakespeare: Pattern of Excelling Nature*. David Bevington and Jay L. Halio, eds. (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1978), p. 235.

6. *Adventures in Reading* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985); G. Robert Carlsen, Anthony Tovatt, Patricia O. Tovatt, eds. *Insights* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985); Edmund J. Farrell, Ouida H. Clapp, and Karen J. Kuehner, eds. *Patterns in Literature* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1987); Julie West Johnson and Margaret Grauff Forst, eds. *Literature* (Evanston, Ill.: McDougal, Littell & Co., 1987). *Understanding Literature* (New York: Scribner Educational Pub.; New York: MacMillan Pub. Co.; London: Collier Macmillan Pub., 1987).

14. "Liberalism did not eliminate censorship. It forced the censors underground. ..." (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. 1988), pp. 16-17.

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